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THE Unexplained

MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

120

Comets' fiery history
The talents of D.D. Home
The Amityville debate
The mind of a psychic
The horse whisperers

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THE Unexplained
MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

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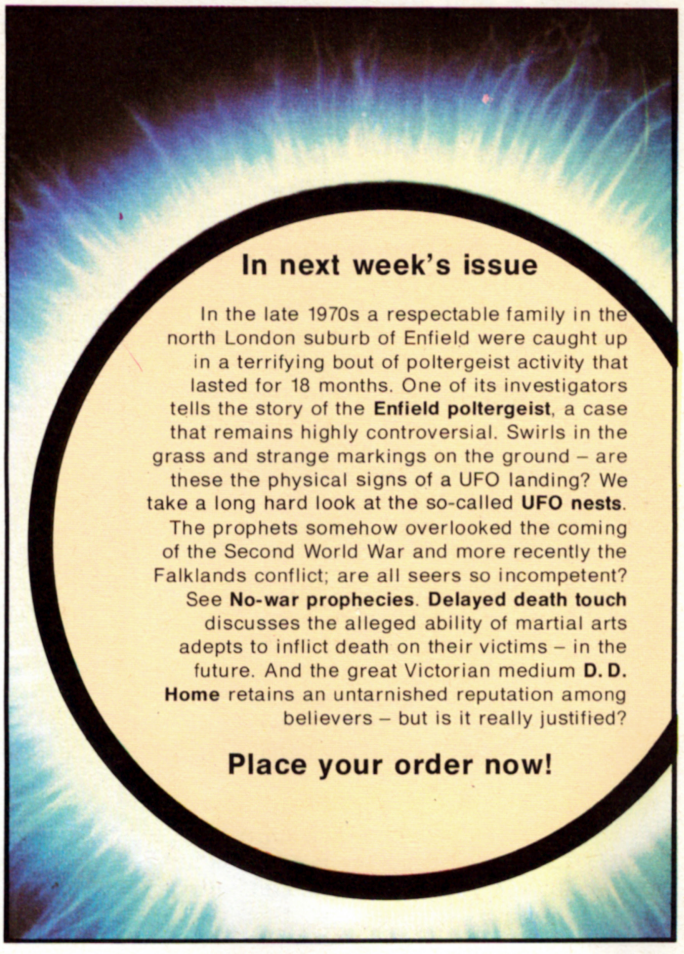

In next week's issue

In the late 1970s a respectable family in the north London suburb of Enfield were caught up in a terrifying bout of poltergeist activity that lasted for 18 months. One of its investigators tells the story of the **Enfield poltergeist**, a case that remains highly controversial. Swirls in the grass and strange markings on the ground – are these the physical signs of a UFO landing? We take a long hard look at the so-called **UFO nests**. The prophets somehow overlooked the coming of the Second World War and more recently the Falklands conflict; are all seers so incompetent? See **No-war prophecies**. **Delayed death touch** discusses the alleged ability of martial arts adepts to inflict death on their victims – in the future. And the great Victorian medium **D. D. Home** retains an untarnished reputation among believers – but is it really justified?

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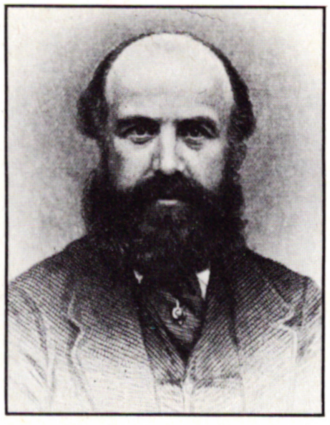
Their master's voice

A maddened horse suddenly quiet and tame . . . a tired old nag turned into a prancing thoroughbred . . . a horse obedient to commands that are not even uttered . . . what is the secret of such amazing control? FRANK SMYTH reveals the old art of the Horse Whisperers

IN 1873 A DILETTANTE historian named William Smith visited Lee Gap horse fair near Dewsbury, Yorkshire, and came away convinced that he had seen a magician in action. He wrote in his diary:

> A gypsyman there had what was described as the 'horse-sense': this being the ability to control horses from a distance without any word of command, but with a slight gesture of the hand seeming to bid them now come, now stay, now run, canter or gallop as he wished. His companions averred that this gift was not common to all gypsies, and that horsemen without gypsy blood also have it, but that it is rare.

Smith noted that the 'gypsyman' seemed able to influence not just his own animals but those of casual visitors to the fair, including carriage horses. 'I was told,' he concluded, 'that the art lies in a charm or amulet which possesses some preternatural efficacy over the beasts; and . . . I could not doubt it.'



Above: William Smith, an amateur historian, diarist and antiquarian of the late Victorian period. He left an account of the seemingly magical control over horses demonstrated by a 'Horse Whisperer' at a fair in 1873

Below: the horse fair at Skirling in Scotland, painted by James Howe in the 19th century. Such events were natural gathering places of the Horse Whisperers

The twin fairs of Lee Gap and Latter Lee, chartered by Henry II in the 12th century, are still held every August and are among the few centres of Romany horse trading left in the north of England. But, sad to say, nothing as spectacular as that witnessed by Smith has been reported in recent years. What Smith saw was a 'Horse Whisperer' about his mysterious business, and today the 'preternatural' art is all but dead, and may even be totally extinct. Yet the Horse Whisperers were once widespread in England and Scotland.

For about 1000 years before the Norman Conquest, the only horses indigenous to the British Isles were the shaggy ponies such as the Shetland, Connemara, and New Forest breeds that still thrive today. The Romans imported cavalry mounts, probably of Arab and Persian stock, but the main draught animals of the Anglo-Saxons were oxen, and remained so in most parts of the country until the early 17th century. For many hundreds of years, therefore, a man would have to be either a military farrier or in the service of a nobleman to gain skill at horse handling.

A hundred years after the Conquest, plate armour began to supplement the light chain mail and leather of the Norman cavalryman,

and 'heavy' horses were imported from France to carry the knights in their new and bulky gear. Gradually such horses as the Percheron were crossed with others to produce native breeds: the Suffolk Punch, Cleveland Bay, Shire, and Clydesdale – shaggy-footed giants ideal for working in harness. Compared with the oxen of earlier years, they were highly intelligent animals, readily responsive to training. It was with them, perhaps during the 16th century, that the Horse Whisperers perfected their skills.

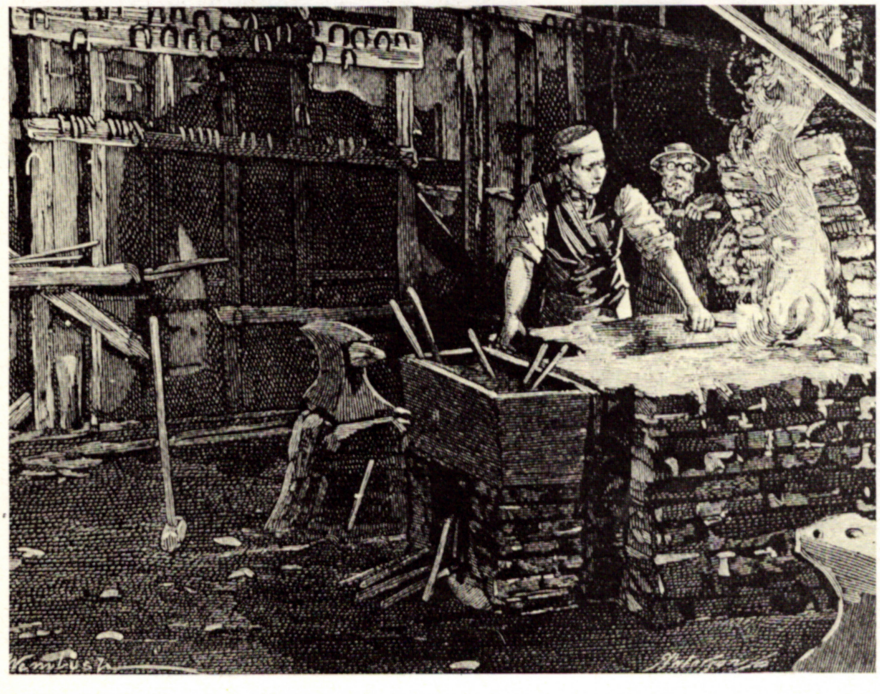
The date of the appearance of the Horse Whisperers has to be speculative, for little was written about them before the 18th century. By then they had become a 'freemasonry' in their own right, with passwords, salutes, and possibly secret handshakes. Almost certainly they were the lineal descendants of the privileged military horse-handlers of medieval times.

The reason for their self-imposed secrecy, to begin with at least, was two-fold: first, to guard their skills from outsiders, and second, to avoid charges of witchcraft. It seems likely that the Whisperers came into the 'cunning man' category of primitive magic workers, most of whom seem to have escaped the rigorous persecutions of the 17th century. The Essex born 'Cunning Murrell' was much sought after by farmers for his healing powers and control over various animals, including the horse.

Dan Wickett, who died in his native Polperro, Cornwall, in the mid 1960s and was famous as a wart healer, worked as a ploughboy in his youth and was said to have had 'The Word', another term for the Horse Whisperer's skill. Another contemporary possessor of The Word was Charles Walton (see page 194), who worked as a ploughman in Warwickshire in the early part of the present century. His power over animals extended to cattle, toads and birds, and it was apparently fear of these occult skills that caused an unknown assailant to drive a pitchfork through his throat at Lower Quinton in 1945. This gives him the dubious distinction of being the last 'witch' to be 'executed' in England.

Above: the Lee Gap horse fair in Yorkshire, where Smith was so impressed with one 'gypsyman's' special skills in horse handling

Below: 'Cunning Murrell' (right) at an Essex forge, producing magical bottles to counteract diabolical influences. He was also known for his healing powers and control over horses

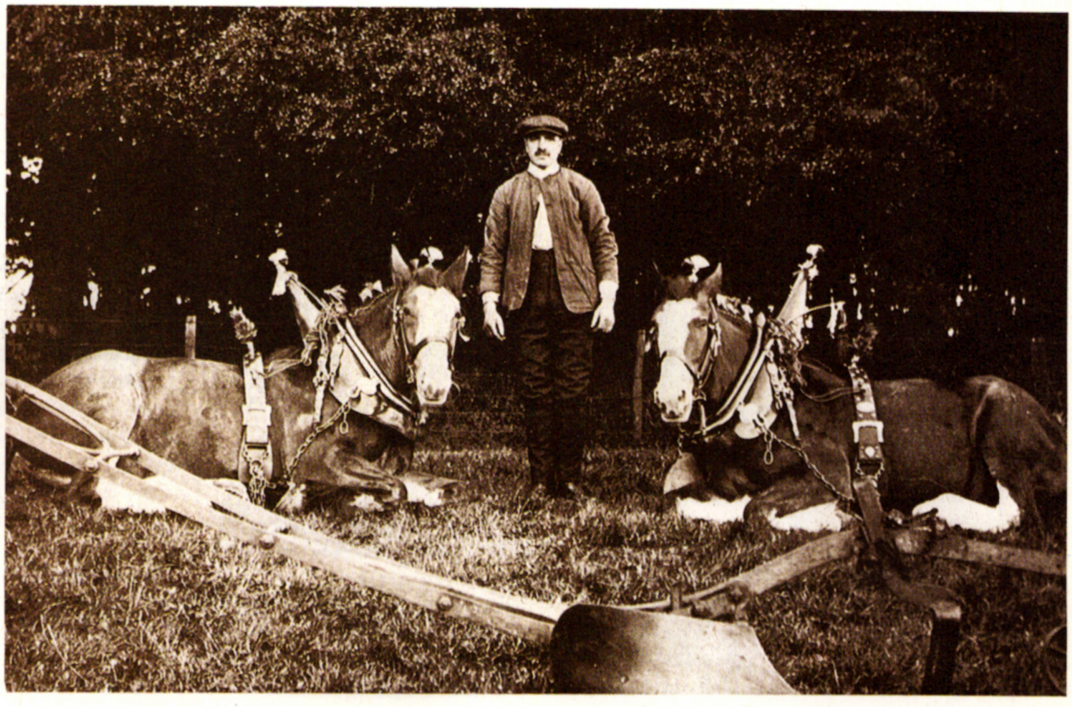


The last English stronghold of the Whisperers was East Anglia, where, even after the introduction of the petrol-driven tractor, the monotonously flat lands made ploughing with a horse team both relatively easy and economical. Here, in the dying years of the craft, folklorists such as George Ewart Evans were able to record the tradition through stories from the older generation.

'Thus I command'

The East Anglian Whisperers certainly shared many of the attributes of the 'cunning men'. Their secret phrase of power was said to be *sic iubeo* – 'thus I command' – but whether this was simply a password among themselves, or was supposed to have a direct effect on their horses, is not clear. Their main power lay in talismans, one for attracting or 'drawing' the horses, and the other for repelling or 'jading' them. The drawing charm was the milt – called the pad in Scotland – a spongy wedge of tissue found in a foal's mouth just after birth. The Whisperer removed the milt, which called for dexterity because the foal usually swallows it immediately, then dried it and impregnated it with aromatic oils.

The jading amulet was rather more mysterious. According to tradition a frog, or sometimes a natterjack toad, was killed and impaled on a whitethorn to dry out, then buried for a month till the flesh rotted away. The bones were then carefully collected and thrown onto the surface of a running stream.



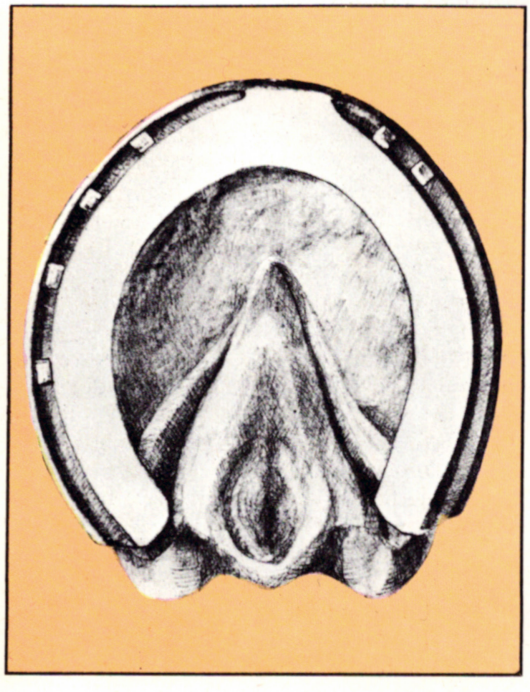
An early 20th-century photograph of a member of the Scottish 'Brotherhood of the Horseman's Word' – or Horse Whisperers – taken in West Lothian. The pose of the horses indicates the high degree of control the horseman has over them

The one bone that floated and drifted against the current was kept for the talisman.

According to Evans in his book *The pattern under the plough* (1966), this bone was the ilium or main bone in the frog's pelvic girdle, which looks rather like a chicken wishbone. More importantly, it closely resembles the 'frog' or V-shaped band of horn on the underside of a horse's hoof. Being both a visual and a verbal pun, it is a powerful piece of imitative magic. Explaining the amulets further, Evans wrote in the limited circulation magazine *Pentagram* in 1968:

> There were, I learned, two classes of herbs and substances used by certain horsemen. The first class strongly attracted a horse by their pleasant odour or taste . . . the milt came under the class of 'drawing substance' though only among the horsemen of the inner ring [the Whisperers]. The horsemen who had the 'word' or 'know' as it was called in Suffolk, first steeped the milt in one of the sweet-smelling substances so that it was used as a 'drawing' charm. . . .

Above: George Ewart Evans, the folklorist who has recorded the tradition of East Anglian Horse Whisperers



Left: the underside of a horse's hoof showing the 'frog', which is a V-shaped band of horn. The V-shaped pelvic bone of a frog is used by the Horse Whisperers in a charm to repel, or 'jade', a horse. Being both a visual and a verbal pun, the frog bone becomes a powerful piece of imitative magic

The plants used to impregnate the milt included sorrel, bryony, cinnamon, rosemary and tansy. The frog bone, on the other hand, was carried in a leather pouch or linen wrapping along with either a piece of raw flesh or a gobbet of animal grease – substances that offended the horse's sensitive sense of smell so much that it would not go near the horseman with the amulet.

As well as these rudimentary drawing and jading devices, the Whisperers used their shrewd understanding of horse psychology and physiology to achieve startling effects – and some of their tricks were simple to the point of crudity. For instance, even a tired old nag could be made to arch its neck and prance like a thoroughbred by slipping a piece of raw ginger under its tail – an old horseman's wile that eventually found its way into everyday language in the phrase 'to ginger things up'. And in order to operate on the horse's hindquarters or legs, the Whisperer would nip its upper lip tightly with a piece of wire known as a 'twitch'. Curiously, the horse tends to concentrate on the head pain, largely ignoring what is happening to its quarters.

George Rowe, a former farrier from Dartford in Kent, explained:

> If a fire breaks out in a cowshed you open the doors and the cows simply file out. If a fire breaks out in a stable the horses go berserk, thrashing around in

Bryony is one of the sweet-smelling herbs used by the Horse Whisperers in an amulet to 'draw', or attract, horses. It is made into an aromatic oil and poured onto the milt, a spongy tissue in the mouth of a new-born foal

their stalls, kicking out at anything that moves, even break their legs – anything but walk out in an orderly manner. The thing to do when they are in that sort of mood is frighten them in a different way; it's a difficult thing to explain but the fears tend to counteract each other and the horse stands petrified with fright. One can then handle the animal with relative ease.

There are many stories of farmers who were foolish enough to dismiss a Whisperer, or otherwise annoy him, only to find that their horses could not be moved from the stable. In these cases, Evans thinks that the Whisperer would have smeared a jading substance over the threshold, making the horse frightened to cross it.

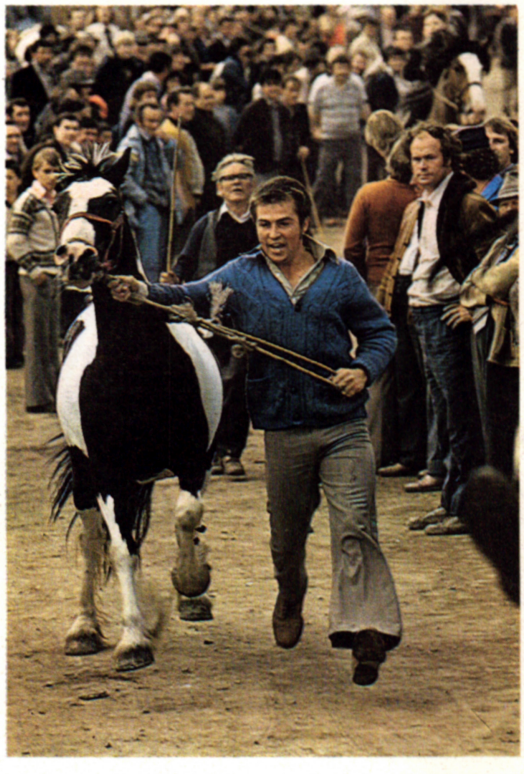
Interwoven with their plain 'horse sense' was a mystique that the Whisperers cultivated, perhaps deliberately, in order to make their talents seem special. There are numerous stories of horsemen binding wounds with cheese rind, strips of mouldering harness leather or spiders' webs to cure inflammation and protect against infection – and it was not until the discovery of penicillin in mould cultures that the principle behind such medication became apparent. The Whisperer was often called upon to doctor humans, his reputation probably helped by folk memories of the magical powers of the blacksmith and, in Celtic mythology, of the horse itself. He would weave necklets of horsehair to cure goitre, or powder the hair on mouldy bread to make a potion to banish worms.

But the enduring mystery of the Horse Whisperers lies in the apparent sophistication of their brotherhood. Though few clues remain as to the East Anglian society, Evans does speak of the 'inner ring', a term having a definite masonic sound to it. And the Latin tag *sic iubeo* is surely not a term that an 18th-century agricultural worker would ordinarily use. If the Whisperers did have their roots in a medieval craft guild, however, such a phrase might just have endured through the years.

The Scottish 'Brotherhood, or Society, of the Horseman's Word' survived into the late 19th century, and possibly on into the 20th, for much the same reasons as its East Anglian counterpart: horse power was economically feasible in Aberdeenshire, Morayshire and parts of the Lowlands for much later than elsewhere. The sophistication – and masonic influence – of the north-eastern horsemen is immediately apparent in their 'Oath', which dates from at least 1780. In it, the novice horseman declares:

> I of my own free will and accord solemnly vow and swear before God and all these witnesses that I will heal, conceal, and never reveal any part of the true horsemanship which I am about to receive at this time. Furthermore I solemnly vow and swear that I will neither write it nor indite, cut it nor carve it on wood or stone, nor yet on anything movable or immovable under the canopy of heaven, nor yet so much as wave a finger in the air to none but a horseman.

The initiate goes on to 'vow and swear' that he will neither 'give it nor see it given' to a 'tradesman of any kind save to a blacksmith or a horse-soldier'. The oath goes on to keep the secret from 'a farmer or a farmer's son unless he be working his own or his father's



A horseman (right) taking his horse through its paces at Appleby horse fair (far right) in Cumbria. Who knows whether among the throng there is one who still uses the special, secret skills of the Horse Whisperers?

horses, a fool or a madman, my father, mother, sister, brother or any womankind,' the last including 'my wife, daughter nor yet the very dearest ever lay by my side'.

The 'true horsemanship' is not to be revealed to anyone 'after sunset Saturday night nor before sunrise Monday morning'. Furthermore, the novice swears:

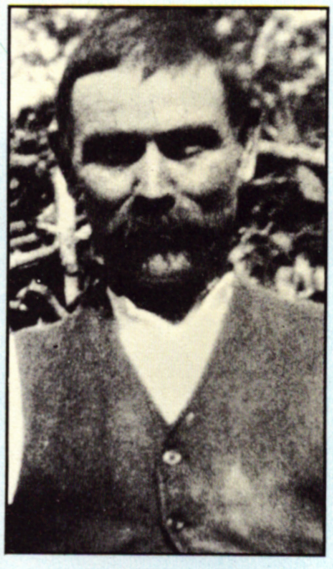
> . . . neither to abuse nor bad use any man's horses with it and if I see a brother do so I will tell him of his fault. Furthermore I will never give it . . . to any under the age of 16 years nor above that of 45 years . . . unless there be three or more lawful sworn brethren present after finding them to be so by trying and examining them.

The final vow

Nor, he promises with an Aberdonian touch, will he give it 'for less than the sum of £1 sterling or value thereof'. He swears never to refuse to attend a meeting if notified within three days except in 'case of riding fire or going for the doctor'. The final vow is:

> If I fail to keep these promises may my flesh be torn to pieces with a wild horse, and my heart cut out with a horseman's knife, and my bones buried on the sands of the seashore where the tide ebbs and flows every 24 hours, so that there be no remembrance of me amongst lawful brethren. . . .

According to a 19th-century account of such a 'swearing in' ceremony, the final chilling oath was followed by the investiture of the blindfolded novice with the 'regal crown, the royal robe, and the sacred sword belt of the Brotherhood'. When his blindfold was removed he discovered that these were an old hat bedecked with imitation horse's ears, a horse blanket, and a girth-strap. He then ate bread and salt, and 'the evening degenerated into drunkenness and true horseplay.'



Charles Walton, said to possess 'The Word' giving power over horses, could also control other animals. He was murdered in 1945 – probably by someone who feared his occult powers

There is a sinister footnote to the history of the Scottish brotherhood, which is unlikely to be coincidence. The horsemen often referred to their meetings as 'kuklos' from the Greek meaning 'circle'. On Christmas Eve in 1865, six young Confederate cavalry officers, all of Scottish descent, met together in Pulaski, Tennessee, to form a 'drinking' brotherhood. Casting around for a name, they came up with 'kuklos' and added the word 'clan' spelled with a K for alliterative effect. Today, the initiation rites of the Ku Klux Klan include the robing of a new member with the 'sacred crown, robe and sword belt' – which are in fact an old hat, blanket, and leather strap.

Many secret societies sprang up in Britain during the 18th century, each with its regalia, its oath, and its password, and it is at least possible that the Horse Whisperers, whether English or Scottish, inspired one or two of them. In Scotland itself the skilled horse-handler has for centuries been regarded with a certain awe. The Aberdeenshire dialect phrase for him is 'orra loon' – meaning 'odd or misplaced lad'.

And the 'Horseman's Toast' used as a skipping rhyme among schoolchildren in the Grampian district still lends the 'orra loon' and his art an air of biblical unease:

> Here's tae the horse wi' the four white feet,
> The chestnut tail and mane,
> A star on his face and a blaze on his breast
> And his master's name was Cain.

The mind at large

Just as a person can apparently be invaded by other selves, so it seems that the 'normal' self can wander to far-off times and places. ARCHIE ROY recounts some classic cases of such 'distant seeing' – and one in which he was himself involved as a witness

OVER THE PAST CENTURY there has been collected an impressive body of evidence that certain human beings have the clairvoyant faculty – an ability to acquire data about people and places without using the normal five senses. Some of these clairvoyants – or 'sensitives' or 'paragnosts' – have been studied by the most careful and skilful psychical researchers, who have had to come to the conclusion that their gift is genuine. But while one can be intellectually convinced of the reality of clairvoyance by their evidence, one is unlikely to be totally convinced unless one experiences it in person. I had just such an experience with a Glasgow sensitive, Albert Best. A friend took me to visit him at his home, without telling him my name or address. Mr Best, who believes that spirits of the dead work through him, told me that a number of people who had died wished to give me greetings and best wishes. He then proceeded to name them and gave me some characteristic details about each, including the addresses they used to live at, complete with street name and number. All were in the vicinity of the address at which I now live, and yet I had never heard of most of them.

On making enquiries subsequently, I found that these people had indeed existed and had lived at the addresses Mr Best had given me. In some cases, however, they had lived there 10 years or more before I had moved to that district. It is interesting that these messages should be so concerned with

Below: Albert Best, a psychic who practises in Glasgow. He interprets his own skills as the result of the spirits of the dead working through him. Other explanations are possible, however: for example, that he gains information about the dead telepathically from friends or relations present at the sittings

Right: the French psychical researcher and doctor Eugène Osty. He made many noteworthy experimental investigations of mediums and psychics of all descriptions. In his studies of psychometrists, or 'object readers', he found that they preferred to work with such items as hair or fingernails from the absent person with whom they were trying to establish rapport

Left: Alison Goodall was apparently put in touch with her dead father (inset) at a sitting with Albert Best. Mr Best correctly stated that Miss Goodall's work involved writing – she was in fact a journalist. Among the many accurate personal details he gave about her father, he said that he had been connected with the law: Mr Goodall had been a police Chief Superintendent. At another sitting Mr Best was equally impressive when he passed on 'messages from the dead' to the author (above)

the deceased persons' addresses: Mr Best had formerly worked for many years as a postman. This is typical of the way in which the personal characteristics of a psychic seem to influence the nature of the messages that come through him.

This test was, of course, in no way conclusive but was certainly worth following up. I asked Mr Best if I might bring a friend to visit him in a fortnight's time. I was particularly careful in making this arrangement not only to avoid giving the name of the friend – indeed at that time I had not even decided whom to invite – but also to avoid using the words 'he' or 'she'. When I took my friend to Mr Best's flat it was the first time he had met her. I was careful, of course, not to introduce her by name to him.

Mr Best, like a number of sensitives, goes into an almost imperceptibly altered state of consciousness to operate. In that state he claimed that my friend's deceased father was present and that he was providing information. Mr Best made the following statements:

> Your father is dead, your mother is still alive. You have one brother but no sisters. Your father was connected with the law. He died very suddenly. When reading and in his slippers he would place the heel of one on the toe of the other and had a habit of pushing the heel off his upper foot with the toe of the other slipper. His strongest drink was milk, and it was a bit of a joke in the family. When you and your mother would try to persuade him to travel abroad he would say such things as 'No, my heart's in the Highlands' and refuse to go. He had two watches. One is still in the family house; the other, a wristlet watch, has had a new strap put on it during the past week. I see you with a lot of other people. You are all writing, scribbling away. But you're not a novelist.

Afterwards my friend, who is a journalist and whose father was a police superintendent, confirmed that every single statement was correct – even to the watch, which she happened to be wearing. It had belonged to her father and she had put a new strap on it a week previously.

During the same meeting a number of other facts were given with the claim that they referred to my life and family, some of them going back 30 to 40 years. All were correct – if the two sets of statements, referring to me and to my friend, had been switched round, they would have failed lamentably to fit us. The whole experiment markedly strengthened my conviction that, whatever interpretation one puts on it, such a gift exists.

Among the psychical investigators who have studied sensitives with such gifts have been Dr Osty, a French physician who

Right: Dr J. Hettinger, who studied psychometry and obtained enough evidence to write two books on what he called the 'ultra-perceptive faculty'

became director of the Institut Métapsychique International in Paris, Dr J. Hettinger, who wrote two books describing his experiments and conclusions, and Professor W.H.C. Tenhaeff of the University of Utrecht's Parapsychological Institute. All three made a particular study of so-called psychometrists, sensitives who seem to obtain their best results when they are allowed to hold some object, letter or document belonging to the 'target' person, who may be alive or dead.

A permanent link

None of the researchers believed that the object in some mysterious way stored up information that was somehow 'read' by the sensitive. All that it did was to allow the sensitive to achieve a psychic connection with the person or persons to whom it had belonged. Once that had been achieved, even should the object be destroyed or taken away the sensitive could still obtain data psychically from the owner of the object. Neither did it matter how long ago the person had last handled it. Once the psychic contact had been made, even events in the life of the person following the time he or she had last touched the object could be perceived by the sensitive. And even more startling was the fact that sensitives, or at least some of them, could predict future events in the life of the 'target' person. This ability of a psychic to look ahead in time is repugnant to many people's cherished beliefs concerning the nature of time and free will; nevertheless the evidence, looked at without prejudice, is strong.

One of the most famous cases of psychometry is that of Señora Maria Reyes de Z., studied by the psychical researcher Dr G. Pagenstecher in the 1920s. The case of the Spanish traveller is completely characteristic of the ability of a psychometrist seemingly to merge with the mind of another human being and obtain information from it.

Dr Pagenstecher gave Señora de Z. a sealed envelope, the contents of which were unknown even to him. The woman said that she seemed to be aboard a great liner. There was an atmosphere of panic although the sea was calm. Many people wore lifejackets. She saw a large man of pale complexion with dark eyes and black hair, with a beard and moustache. Over one eye he had a scar. He seemed Spanish in appearance. She saw him tear a page from his notebook and write a few lines on it. While he did so, she heard a number of explosions. The man finished his note and put into a bottle, which he sealed and threw overboard. The ship was obviously sinking and Señora de Z. heard the man cry out in Spanish: 'My God, my children!'

After the lady came out of her trance Dr Pagenstecher allowed several witnesses to examine another envelope and confirm that it was securely sealed. Then he opened it. In it was a statement that the first envelope contained a torn piece of paper, carrying the message, in Spanish:

> The ship sinks. Good-bye, my Luisa. Take care of my children and see that they don't forget me. Havana. May God protect you and me. Good-bye.

The two sealed envelopes had been sent to Dr Pagenstecher by an attorney. They came from a man who knew a woman whose husband had almost certainly been drowned in the sinking of the *Lusitania* some years previously. The liner was a victim of a U-boat on 7 May 1915. The torn scrap of paper had been taken from a bottle washed ashore after the sinking and had finally been sent to Havana. It is probable that the message came from Señor Penoles, the husband of the woman. It is recorded that a description of the appearance of Señor Penoles fitted

An object reader working with the glove of a person with whom she is attempting to establish rapport. Researchers generally do not believe that the objects used in such sessions are stores of information about the absent person: rather they are the means by which a link with the person (whether alive or dead) can be established. If the object is subsequently destroyed the link between the person and the medium may persist

Left: Dr Gustav Pagenstecher, a German doctor living in Mexico, who was a tireless investigator of the mind's apparent ability to perceive remote places and past events. He concluded that a sensitive was most likely to perceive events in an object's history if they were of a type that had occurred frequently, were associated with extreme emotion, or were very recent

perfectly with the description given by the psychic of the man she had 'seen'.

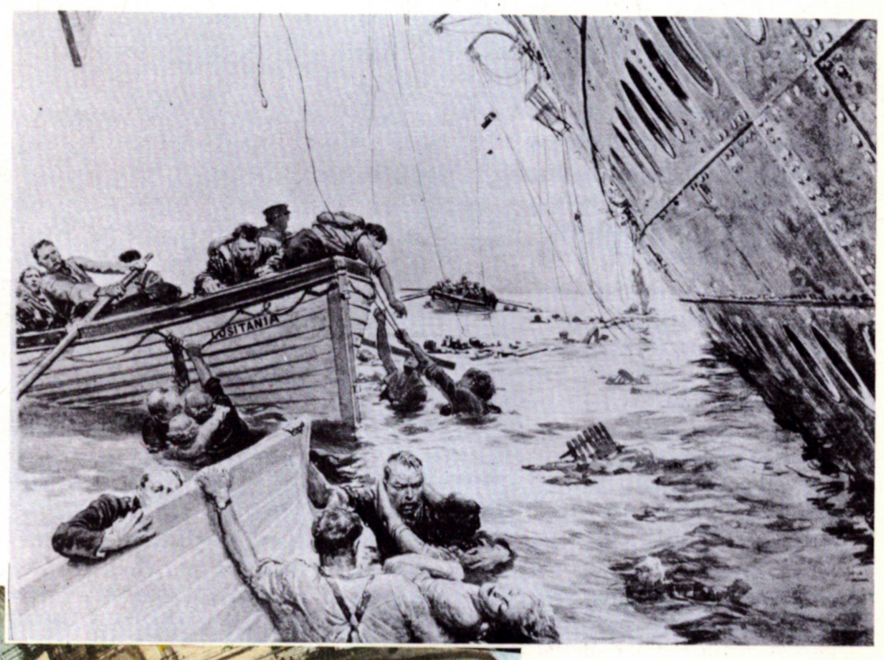
Osty, Hettinger and Tenhaeff have collected scores of cases that are just as impressive. Over many years Professor Tenhaeff studied a number of 'paragnosts' (the name he gave to such psychics). He found that with some of them the rapport with the 'target' people, whether alive or dead, became so strong that they seemed to enter into the paragnosts. The psychics tended to 'become' those other persons, to feel sensations and emotions characteristic of them, as well as sharing their memories.

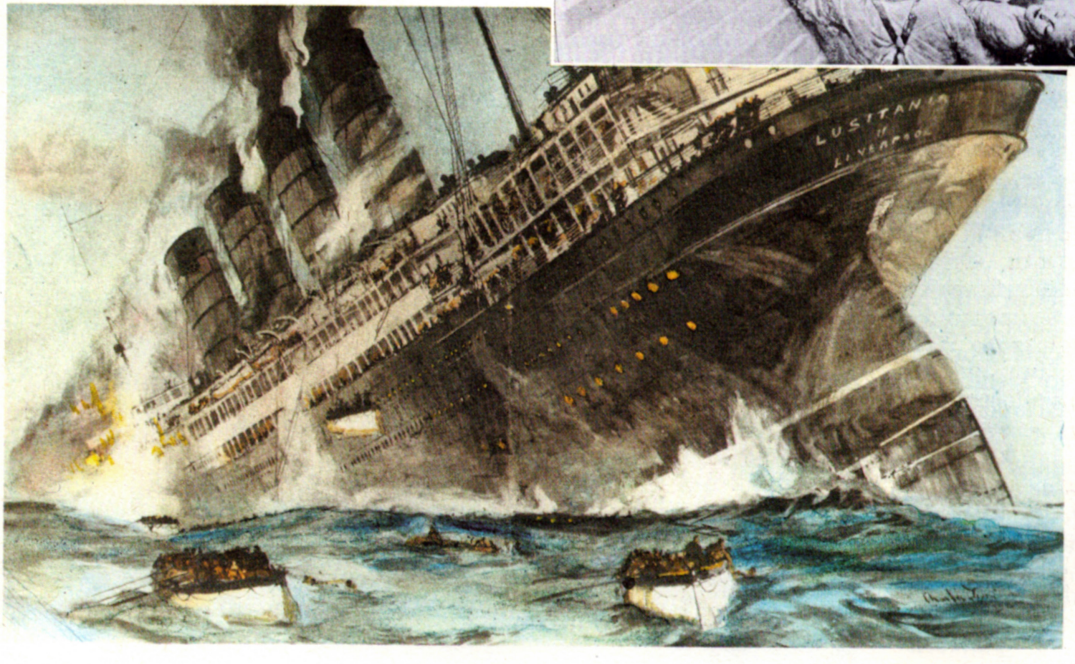
Mr C. H. known in Tenhaeff's files as Delta, was an extreme case of this: he identified with the target person to such an extent that he was virtually possessed by the other. He set up as a psychic detective and was often employed to find missing persons. In one such case an elderly man, E. G., went missing and Delta was called in. In a report to Professor Tenhaeff he subsequently described how he went to the old man's bedroom to obtain psychic 'impressions'. He had already experienced strong feelings that had led him to the conclusion – later proved correct – that the old man had drowned.

> G. manifested himself once again . . . I felt myself becoming very unwell. It was as if there was something in the way on my chest. It was the same feeling I had with a bad cold. I further noticed that G. was sobbing through me. Tears came into my eyes . . . I went through the house once more and walked up the stairs. I did this in the same way in which G. had done so during his lifetime. I also had very strong eructations (which I never have). I was told that G. had been much troubled by this. All the feelings of G. had become mine.

Several of Professor Tenhaeff's paragnosts expressed the fear that sooner or later they would be unable to 'throw off' the personality with which they had entered into rapport and so become truly possessed. Delta told Tenhaeff that if he feared that he was no longer in complete control of the situation and in danger of being entirely overwhelmed by the other personality, he could nevertheless restrain the other and become himself again. There are, however, cases on record where possession seems to have been total and 'the other' has taken up residence like a squatter of the mind, displacing the rightful owner of the body to limbo. Whether that 'other' is essentially an alien personality or a secondary personality created around the memories and experiences with which the sensitive makes contact is a matter for debate.

Was the Watseka wonder the victim of a 'squatter in the mind'? See page 2434





The sinking of the British liner *Lusitania* by a German submarine in May 1915 resulted in the deaths of 1000 people. Years later, in Mexico, a sensitive seemed to get in touch with this scene. Holding an envelope whose contents were unknown to her, she 'saw' a scene of panic on a ship, amidst which one passenger put a note in a bottle and threw it overboard. The envelope she was holding contained just such a message, allegedly washed ashore after the *Lusitania*'s sinking. And there had indeed been panic on board the *Lusitania* as the great ship had listed to one side and lifeboats capsized as they were launched

Home and away

Of all the great mediums only one, Daniel Dunglas Home, was never caught cheating (though he was often accused of it). Yet his seances were perhaps the most remarkable ever recorded. BRIAN INGLIS assesses the career of this 19th century medium

ASKED TO NAME the psychic whose career did most to demonstrate the reality of paranormal powers, few parapsychologists today would think of Daniel Dunglas Home. If reminded of him, they are inclined to say that his career as a medium was too long ago – it had virtually ended by 1875 – and that he was only tested under scientific conditions towards the end of his life. This is true: yet there is a sense in which the results of those tests, important though they were, are less impressive than the record of his mediumship as a whole, spanning a quarter of a century.

Born in Scotland in 1833, Home was taken to the United States by an aunt who had adopted him; and in the late 1840s he caught the extraordinary 'psychic' contagion that spread throughout the United States – and later across the Atlantic – which is commonly traced to its source in the Hydesville, New York, home of the Fox family (see page 1394). It was as if an epidemic of poltergeist-type phenomena had developed, which bestowed upon certain individuals psychic powers – and also manifested itself in the drawing rooms of people who were not aware they had psychic powers, for example during the popular table-turning sessions.

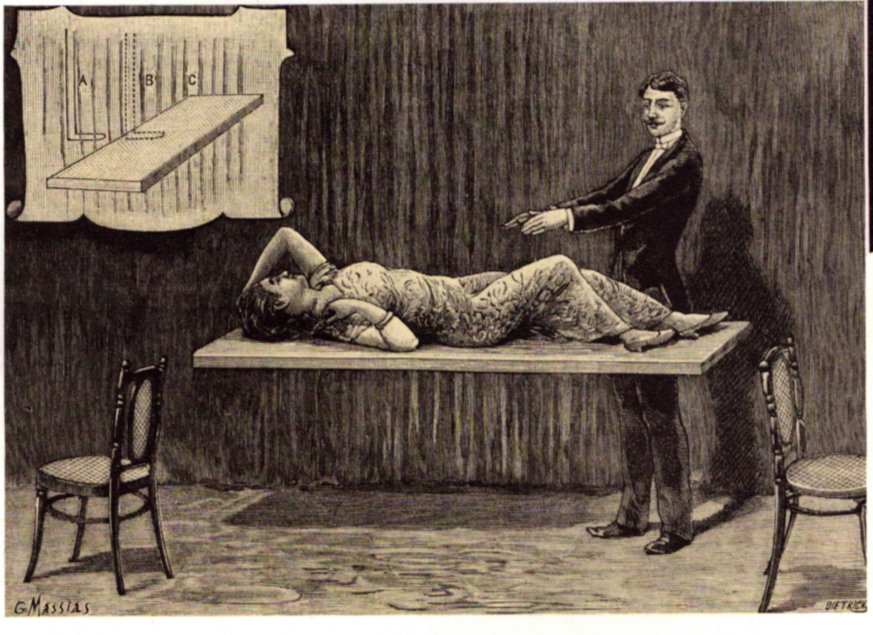
In Home's case, the onset of the powers manifested itself as 'rappings', apparently emanating from his vicinity. Periodically, too, furniture would move, as if pushed to or from him by invisible hands. Home also became clairvoyant; and he began to give seances to neighbours and friends. His powers increased: on occasion he was levitated bodily; and sitters at his groups reported the appearance of ghostly hands that materialised and proved capable of gripping objects such as pens and even writing messages with them.

In one of the early published reports of a Home session the editor of the *Hartford Times* of Connecticut described how a 'tolerably well and symmetrically-made' hand, ending at the wrist, had shaken hands with everybody present.

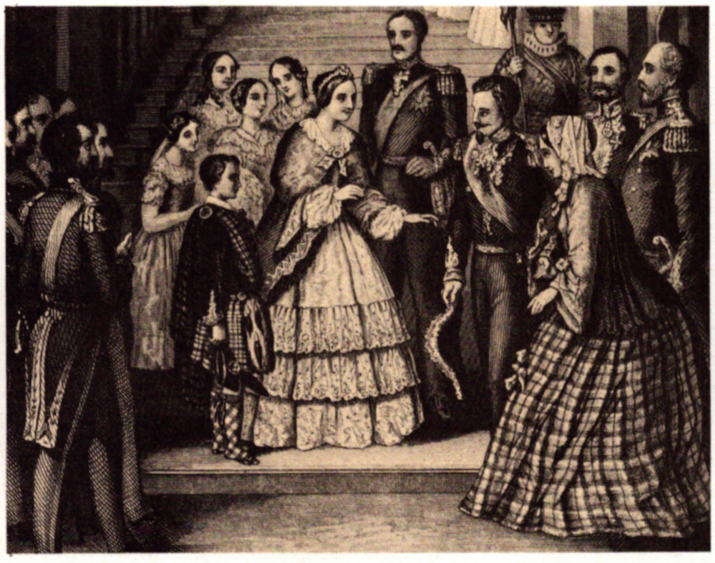
Home was consumptive, and on medical advice he returned to Britain in 1855. As the word spread about his powers he soon became the talk of high society and was duly lionised. But all this attention and flattery failed to overwhelm him; after all he had been brought up to believe that he was the illegitimate son of the aristocratic Scots Home (pronounced 'Hume') family whose name he bore. He soon settled into a comfortable way of life, enjoying the hospitality of wealthy middle-class families, and owners of stately homes – and, before long, even monarchs in royal palaces. But one rule he appears always to have obeyed: he never accepted payment for his psychic 'performances'.

Although the phenomena he produced varied, a typical seance would commonly begin with 'raps', apparently issuing from various parts of the room, sometimes simultaneously. Then the seance table – which might be a light card table, or a heavy mahogany dining table – would begin to shudder and shake, shifting a little, turning round, rising up first on two legs, then on one leg, and sometimes leaving the ground altogether. Musical instruments would play by themselves – and most sitters were impressed by the excellence of the playing – at a distance from the medium. Disembodied hands would materialise, and touch or stroke sitters. Occasionally Home himself would levitate.

Most of what Home did was being done by other mediums in that era, but in several respects he outshone them all. No other medium, for a start, enjoyed his social standing. The sitters who came to watch him were not all credulous believers; the majority were men and women of the world – and as such, several of them were to admit to their profound scepticism at the time they met him,



Daniel Dunglas Home (top) had an extensive repertoire of seance phenomena, which included bodily elongation and incombustibility. But he was – and is – perhaps most famous for his spectacular levitations. Unlike the stage magicians' act (above), D. D. Home's levitation required no apparatus nor any assistance, and often took place in broad daylight in unfamiliar surroundings



Napoleon III, one of D. D. Home's many royal patrons, visits Queen Victoria in 1855. The Queen, however, never met Home, which was curious, for she was certainly interested in Spiritualism and would surely have welcomed any chance to communicate with her 'beloved Albert'

and to the care they took to ensure that they were not duped. They would arrive assuming that the seance would be as most seances were, conducted in near total darkness. But no – Home's were conducted in light good enough for his every action to be observed.

It was this combination – the calibre of the witnesses, and the fact that they could see what was happening throughout the seances – that put Home in a different league from most of the mediums of the time. He could even produce phenomena in daylight; but he preferred gloaming, or firelight, or subdued gaslight, as some of the manifestations – luminosities, for example – were visible only if the lights were low. And the fact that the scores of accounts left by witnesses described what they actually saw in itself demolishes the theories advanced, then and later, to suggest how Home might have cheated.

Stage magicians would have needed gadgetry: Home allowed himself to be searched before seances. They would have needed to set the seance room up in advance: Home frequently gave seances in houses he had never entered before, in rooms he had never seen. Illusionists would have needed assistants: Home had no assistant. In such circumstances, is it conceivable that, if he were using sleight-of-hand (or of foot) he could have continued to give seances once, twice or three times a week for nearly a quarter of a century, and never be detected in fraud? On a number of occasions, professional conjurors came to watch him and try to catch him out – and yet always went away baffled.

Right: one of the many vitriolic cartoons that appeared in 1888 when Home was tried for fraudulently persuading a rich widow to part with her fortune. She retrieved her money, but only on the grounds that Spiritualism was 'a delusion' – not that Home was a confidence trickster

The orphan and the widow

If Home had been fraudulent, or manifestly unethical in other ways, one might have expected that he would have been exposed at some stage in his long career. But by all accounts, his moral character was impeccable. Only once did he slip up, and even then he was more sinned against than sinning. A rich widow made him her heir, and settled £60,000 on him, which his friends not unnaturally advised him to take. When she took him to court to retrieve her money, it was with the excuse that he had extracted it from her by telling her the spirits wanted him to have it. The judge was unimpressed with her story, excoriating her for 'misstatements on oath so perversely untrue that they have embarrassed the Court to a great degree, and quite discredited the plaintiff's testimony'. Nevertheless, he awarded her the money, on the grounds that Spiritualism was a delusion and that she, certainly, was deluded.

Otherwise, Home's reputation remained free from serious blemish. With few exceptions, those who knew him well loved as well as admired him; and his two marriages – his first, much beloved, wife died young – were happy. The possibility that he led a double life can be discounted; with the exception of a

In his heyday Home had many supporters among fashionable literary circles, both in the United States and in Europe. In Britain he was greatly admired by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (above) and influenced Charles Dickens (right). In the United States, Home was deemed a genuine medium and a man of integrity by such notables as Ralph Waldo Emerson (below right), the writer and philosopher

few members of ruling families and a few statesmen, Home was for two decades one of the best-known personalities in Europe, and any dubious social connections would undoubtedly have been seized upon by Home's many enemies.

That he had so many enemies was hardly surprising. The historian W. E. H. Lecky observed in the mid 1960s that 'nearly all educated men receive an account of a miracle taking place in their own day with an absolute and even derisive incredulity which dispenses with all examination of the evidence.' The judge who found against Home, in spite of the plaintiff's perjury, was expressing what was by then the common view among the educated: seance room materialisations, musical instruments played by spirit hands, levitations and the rest must be fraudulent.

Home survived relatively unscathed partly because he enjoyed protection from friends in the highest places: in France, Emperor Napoleon III; in Russia, Tsar Alexander II; in the Netherlands, Queen Sophie. There were, however, endless malicious rumours that he had been detected cheating by his royal friends and kicked out, but all these are now believed to be pure invention.

In Britain, although he was never invited to demonstrate his powers to Queen Victoria (despite the fact that she had indulged occasionally in table-turning at the royal residence at Osborne on the Isle of Wight), his range of admirers was remarkable – including many leading literary figures: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Lord Lytton, John Ruskin, William Makepeace Thackeray and the economist Nassau Senior. And in the United States there were Henry Longfellow and Ralph Waldo Emerson (who described Home as a 'prodigious genius'). Had his reputation ever been seriously threatened, he could have called on any one of this formidable collection of character witnesses.

Yet even more impressive than the testimonials he received from the rich and famous are the accounts of him and his mediumship by men and women whose names are not now remembered, but who were highly regarded in their day: men such as J. Garth Wilkinson, the friend of Dickens and Tennyson, and Patrick Proctor Alexander, one of the leading literary figures in Scotland, who left a detailed account of his encounter with Home when the medium was on a visit to Edinburgh.

A show of strength

Like so many others who attended one of Home's seances for the first time, Alexander had taken it for granted that he was a charlatan and a showman, and was astonished to find that the famous medium was, in fact, simple and unaffected in his manner. The seance was held in a neighbour's drawing room in good light; and Alexander and an equally sceptical friend availed themselves of the opportunity to watch Home's every movement. Although it was manifest that Home was not using physical force of any kind, a heavy table performed antics at his command, and an accordion played, although neither Home nor anyone else was touching the keys (for once the music was not well played: the tune of *Auld Lang Syne* was recognisable, Alexander recalled, but somewhat bungled).

There are dozens of such accounts of Home's seances; and in none of them is there any suggestion that he could have been employing any trickery. The poet Robert Browning, who loathed Home, was to describe in his satirical *Mr Sludge the medium* how some of the manifestations at the seances could have been faked; but it is clear from the puzzled account Browning had written immediately after attending a seance with Home, years before, that the effects he witnessed and described were not accomplished by the methods he had 'Mr

Sludge' confess to using.

A Monsieur Morio, who had been at a seance with the French royal family in Biarritz, subsequently described how he had seen Home slip off a shoe and use a foot to play his tricks. As it happened, however, the seance he had attended had not been notably productive (periodically Home's power weakened, sometimes spoiling individual seances, and occasionally leaving him altogether for a while). Almost the only manifestation at this particular seance had been the removal of a bracelet from the lady who was sitting on his left, and its transference to another lady who was sitting on the far side of the table. How, Home wanted to know, could this have been accomplished in the sight of all the sitters? 'If my legs were eight feet [2.5 metres] long, it would still have been a miracle.'

The shadows fall

Home had often been threatened with a recurrence of his tubercular condition; and in 1873, at the age of 40, he went to live by the Mediterranean. Although he was to give a few more seances, the move in effect terminated his career; and his only further contribution to the cause to which he had devoted his life was his *Lights and shadows of Spiritualism*, published in 1877. It won him some kudos – but not from sources he would have welcomed. Sceptics were delighted to read his criticism of the kind of mediums who, when their powers waned, took to conjuring tricks in order to maintain their incomes. Ironically, Home's book provided the ammunition the sceptics needed to demonstrate that *all* mediumship was riddled with fraud.

Mediumship was largely discredited, and the Spiritualist movement was in disarray. When Home died in 1886 he was no longer remembered in his own right. Yet telling evidence for his achievements can be found in his widow's two biographies and in the many articles and letters written by his contemporaries that are still filed in the archives of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). And when Frederic Myers combed through them on the society's behalf in the last years of the 19th century, he was forced to admit that, although he had initially been doubtful about accepting that Home was quite the impeccable character his widow made him out to be, he found nothing there to cast doubt on the integrity of the famous medium.

To this day, though many have tried, nobody has found any evidence that detracts from Home's legendary clairvoyant and psychokinetic powers. It seems that his reputation is safe as the outstanding physical medium of his – and indeed, our – time.

If Home's powers were genuine, what are the implications for science? See page 2414

Few campaigns against Home were as hostile and as influential as that waged by Robert Browning (left) through his satirical poem *Mr Sludge the medium* (above: an illustration from the poem, entitled 'Table-turning on the Continent'). Home is described as the worst kind of fake and, despite all the evidence to the contrary, this portrayal was seized upon by sceptics of the day as being literally true

Stars of ill omen

The idea that the development of life on Earth was decisively influenced by comets has been regarded by many as crackpot. But a theory proposed by two British scientists gives it a new and plausible background in physics – as PETER JAMES explains

Below: a computer-enhanced photograph of Comet Bennett. Astronomers Dr Victor Clube and Dr Bill Napier (right, left to right) believe that comets have been responsible for many disasters in the Earth's history. Dragon and serpent motifs – such as in this ancient Egyptian painting from the tomb of Sennutem, 1292 BC (far right) – are, they argue, stylised comets

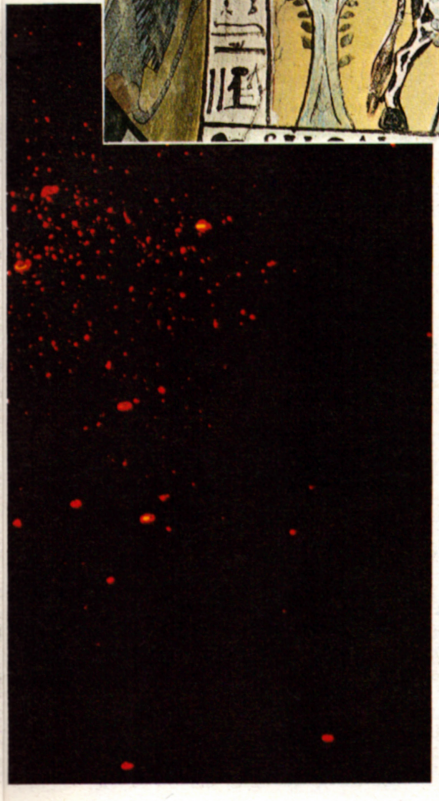
'I WOULD RATHER BELIEVE that two Yankee professors would lie, than that stones would fall from heaven,' exclaimed US president and scientist Thomas Jefferson (1748–1826). He had just heard a report from two Yale University scholars that over 300 pounds (130 kilograms) of meteorites had fallen at Weston, Connecticut, in December 1807. Jefferson was a victim of one of orthodox science's most persistent blind spots: for some 2000 years scientists took the word of Aristotle, who insisted that nothing solid could reach the world from beyond its atmosphere. His grounds for stating this were purely philosophical – beyond the Moon, everything was 'pure', made of matter finer than the Earth. How, then, could stones fall from the heavens?

The legacy of Aristotle crippled scientific research for centuries. As late as the 18th century, the Académie Française persuaded several museums to throw away their meteorite collections on the grounds that they were of no interest to science. And although meteorite falls were frequently witnessed by peasants and others uneducated enough to believe their own eyes, science continued to maintain that meteorites did not exist – because Aristotle had said they could not. Today, of course, scientists recognise the existence of meteorites. But the new theory of the origin of comets put forward by astronomers Victor Clube and Bill Napier of the Royal Observatory in Edinburgh (see page 2341) has excited much the same reaction among modern scientists as did the idea of the existence of meteorites among their ancient counterparts. Clube and Napier point out that, once in 50 million years, the solar system passes through one of the spiral arms of the Galaxy. The solar system is bound, according to Clube and Napier's model, to collide with one of the immense icy clouds of dust that occupy the spaces between the stars. Mayhem results: the comets of the solar system are hurled about in the resulting clash of gravitational fields, and a fresh influx of comets invades the solar system.

Proof for such a theory, say Clube and Napier, has long been available. If the theory is right, we would expect the solar system to be awash with debris – which it is;

and the planets should be pock-marked with craters – which they are. Clube and Napier's model may also be able to explain one of the solar system's most mysterious anomalies, a ring of rubble that lies between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter – the asteroid belt. This has long been the subject of speculative (and unworkable) theories about exploding planets (see page 341) – but according to Clube and Napier, the asteroid belt is a kind of dustbin of material left over from a previous influx of comets, now burnt out.

There would be long-term effects of these periodic saturations of comets. The peak of comet activity would decay only slowly, and the earth would be under permanent threat of bombardment by further extra-terrestrial missiles for many thousands of years. We last left part of the Galactic spiral system, the



Left: the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC), who argued that nothing could reach the Earth's surface from beyond its atmosphere. Until the late 18th century, scientists ignored evidence of meteorites, citing Aristotle. Modern scientists tend to regard new ideas with the same suspicion, and Clube and Napier are well aware of the reception their theory is likely to meet in scientific circles. 'There is something here to outrage everyone,' they say in the introduction to their book

Gould belt, only 10 million years ago, when our hominoid ancestors are thought to have been developing. True man-like beings were in existence a million years ago, and sophisticated prehistoric 'cave' cultures emerged 50,000 years ago. Well-established urban cultures, with written records, date back some 5000 years. Could there be a possibility that man experienced, and remembered, the long aftermath of an encounter with an interstellar cloud of debris?

Clube and Napier feel that significant effects *must* have been felt well into historical times:

> The current overabundance of interplanetary particles, fireball activity and meteor streams . . . all seem to bear witness to a sky that must have been exceedingly active within the past few thousand years.

They calculate that within the last 5000 years there must have been at least 50 impacts with cometary objects weighing between 1 and 1000 megatonnes. The probabilities diminish, of course, as the size of the missiles increases; but there is an even chance that there was at least one encounter with cometary material weighing between 1000 and 10,000 megatonnes within recorded history. The effect of such an encounter would be extreme: an impact between 100 and 10,000 megatonnes would cause blast and radiation damage over almost a million square miles (2.5 million square kilometres).

But Clube and Napier do not only present us with the mathematical probability of a close encounter with a comet. They believe that they can identify the villain – or at least locate the remains of the body. By careful assessment of the remnants circling the skies today, they argue, we can reconstruct 'what must have been larger and most impressive pieces of cometary debris'. A large asteroid called Hephaistos discovered in 1978 – which, at a diameter of 6 miles (10 kilometres), could have wiped out the dinosaurs had it collided with the Earth – a shower of rubble called the beta Taurid stream and a decaying comet called Encke all occupy almost exactly the same orbit – an orbit that comes very close to the Earth. According to Clube and Napier, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that these objects are all fragments of one original body. From the available evidence, they feel that 'almost certainly a 20-km [12-mile] comet was in an Earth-crossing orbit and breaking up, around about 2500 BC.'

What this huge comet would have looked like can be logically deduced. It would have had a magnitude of brightness

> approaching that of the Moon, and sufficient to throw shadows at night. It would have appeared as an intense yellow spot of light surrounded by a circular coma probably larger than the full Moon, with a tail stretching across a large part of the sky.

This prodigious sight, accompanied by a retinue of smaller comets as disintegration increased, would have been *the* dominant phenomenon in the sky for centuries.

Fireball break-up

It is easy to see why the comet would have been universally feared – and with good reason. During the break-up of the comet, as it traversed the Earth's orbit, we would have regularly encountered a stream of meteors. There would have been intense fireball activity, and, at the closest approaches, a strong possibility of Tunguska-like impacts (see page 1030) from comet fragments.

Such is the physical model for Clube and Napier's 'super-comet'. But do the records of ancient Man, who would have witnessed its deadly disintegration, provide any contemporary evidence for its existence? We can hardly expect to find in their writings a dispassionate and scientific description of the phenomenon; it is in the world of mythology that we must look for the images left by the comet.

Clube and Napier feel that we can easily see comets behind the sky-gods and celestial dragons of ancient myth. Practically every ancient culture has its version of a struggle for supremacy between the Sun or the reigning sky-god and an awesome primeval dragon: in Egypt we have Ra and Apophis, in Greece Zeus and Typhon, in Babylonia Marduk and Tiamat and in the Bible Jehovah and Rahab. A physical reality behind such tales would explain the striking similarity that exists between so many Old and New World legends: the dominant theme of all these mythologies is 'theomachy', or war of the gods, replete with descriptions of celestial battles, seismic action, raging seas, falls of stones, 'blood' – red dust – 'thunderbolts'

Noah in the ark, in a stained glass window from a church in Coignières, France. Clube and Napier suggest that the Flood, among many other catastrophes described in the Bible, was caused by the close approach to the Earth of a comet

and other cataclysmic events.

Myths of world conflagrations and deluges take on a new meaning when reread in the light of the comet hypothesis. The Old Testament, in particular, has a framework of catastrophic episodes that could well describe the effects of cometary impacts, beginning with 'Noah's Flood' and the blast of 'fire and brimstone' that levelled Sodom and Gomorrah. Most striking of all are the events that preceded the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt around 1450 BC. As well as the terrestrial problems of frogs and locusts, the Bible describes plagues that can easily be interpreted as the effect of passing through a stream of cometary dust and rubble – the poisoning and reddening of the Nile, soot that burnt the skin, a scorching wind, darkness for days, and fiery 'hailstones' that flattened trees as they fell. There are also indications of seismic action, and perhaps the 'parting of the Red Sea' was due to some tectonic effect.

If all this sounds rather fanciful, it is worth noting that the biblical narrative actually mentions something like a comet at just the point we would expect it. As the Israelites left Egypt, they were guided by a 'pillar of cloud' that rose in the sky before them and glowed like fire at night. Analysing the details of its movements in the book of Exodus, Clube and Napier conclude that we have

> a plain description of an exceptional comet in a direct orbit of low inclination. . . . If the passage is pure invention one would have to congratulate the author on his powers of clairvoyance.

The skilful blend of study of ancient sources and modern astronomical research employed by Clube and Napier makes a case that will have to be taken seriously by scholars in the many disciplines through which their theory ranges. It is to be hoped that there will be no repetition of the excuses used to justify ignoring and deriding the work of another great rebel of 20th-century science, Immanuel Velikovsky (see page 1181). A hypothesis of a cometary cause for the plagues and other miracles of the exodus was popularised, and made slightly notorious, in the 1950s by Velikovsky's *Worlds in collision*. Velikovsky's synthesis of events reads extravagantly: the 'comet' involved is a body of dimensions similar to the Earth's, a comet that later settled down as the planet Venus; a second round of catastrophes around 700 BC was caused by the planet Mars, whose orbit had been disrupted by the errant 'proto-Venus'.

Self-appointed defenders of orthodoxy, including such notable figures as Isaac Asimov and Carl Sagan, made a determined effort to ridicule – even suppress – Velikovsky's work, in one of the most scandalous witch-hunts in the history of science. The reasons for the hysterical reaction to *Worlds in collision* were very often far from scientific: professional jealousy (Velikovsky was not an astronomer by training, but a

A Scottish stone carving showing – according to Clube and Napier – 'a long curved comet tail and a huge halo surrounding a comet head that was probably as bright as the full moon'

The destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (left) and the parting of the Red Sea to allow Moses and the Israelites to escape the Egyptian army (below) could both have been the results of tectonic upheavals associated with the close approach of a comet to the Earth, according to Clube and Napier's theory. This idea is not in itself new – it was proposed by Immanuel Velikovsky in the 1950s – but the theory strengthens the hypothesis by proposing a plausible origin for the comets

psychoanalyst); gross misrepresentations of his work carried in early reviews (it was claimed, for instance, that Velikovsky believed that frogs fell from Venus) and perhaps also a deep-rooted fear of the concept that global catastrophes of the kind he described could have happened in the comparatively recent past.

This somewhat hysterical reaction took all of 30 years to die down. But calm, critical examination of Velikovsky's work is now at last underway – notably by the Society for Interdisciplinary Studies in Britain – and we can begin to assess his contribution to science. His methodology, taking a bold global look at mythology to reflect the recent history of the Earth and the solar system, is invaluable. His books contain a unique store of ancient cosmological myth to which many later researchers, including Clube and Napier, are indebted. Most of all, Velikovsky carried a lone – if colourful – flag for catastrophism through the 1950s.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, most geologists were catastrophists, accepting the evidence that global disasters had shaped the Earth's history and altered the course of biological evolution. Then there was a lull in the popularity of catastrophism. The tide has now turned again, under the sheer weight of the evidence, and geologists are increasingly turning to 'neo-catastrophism'. As graphically expressed by Derek Ager, professor of geology at Bristol University: 'the history of any one part of the earth, like the life of a soldier, consists of long periods of boredom and short periods of terror.'

Comet into planet?

Looking back, we can see that Velikovsky's *general* case for a history of the Earth punctuated by extra-terrestrial catastrophes was justified. But from the extensive literature on Velikovsky's *specific* claims one major scientific objection stands out – the problem of the time scale involved. Velikovsky proposed that the comet that dominated the skies in the last few thousand years BC turned into the planet Venus. But, according to currently accepted laws of astrophysics, the transformation from an elliptical cometary orbit to a nearly circular one in such a short time would be impossible. Clube and Napier's theory avoids this problem – the remains of the body they have suggested are *still* on a cometary, Earth-crossing, orbit, and the accepted laws of contemporary astrophysics are not flouted. They suggest, with complex arguments, that as dangerous comets decayed their names were transferred to planets. For them, Velikovsky's error was simply one of mistaken identity: 'he took the mythology of comets at its face value and, applying it to planets, came up with all sorts of impossible ideas.'

The other problem of time scale is the basic reluctance of many scientists to accept the idea that catastrophes with extra-terrestrial causes could have happened in the recent past. Scientists, as much as anyone else, are subject to the same desire for security – even if that means determining a nice, safe history for the world in which nothing catastrophic has happened except in the remotest past. The concept of a slow uninterrupted progression of life envisaged by Darwin is no longer tenable, as Clube and Napier have realised:

> Darwin was allowed to imagine evolution without the devastating influence of comets. The resultant problems have been akin to explaining a game of football in which no one recognised the presence of the ball.

Further reading

J. Kelly Beatty, Brian O'Leary and Andrew Chaikin (eds), *The new solar system*, Cambridge University Press 1981

Victor Clube and William Napier, *The cosmic serpent: a catastrophist's view of Earth history*, Faber 1982

Nigel Henbest, *The mysterious Universe*, Ebury Press 1981

Amityville – horror or hoax?

An attractive house in Long Island became first the scene of a series of sadistic murders and subsequently a playground for malevolent paranormal forces. MELVIN HARRIS traces the terrifying events that turned a dream home into a place of dread

EARLY IN THE MORNING of 13 November 1974 a young New Yorker, 24-year-old Ronald DeFeo, ran screaming and hysterical into a bar near his home in Ocean Avenue, in Long Island's district of Amityville. Someone, he sobbed, had broken into the DeFeo house and slaughtered the six members of his family. When the police reached the house they discovered his mother, father, two sisters and two brothers shot dead in their beds. DeFeo's claim that the crime had been committed by an intruder was not taken seriously, and he was arrested and charged with the murders.

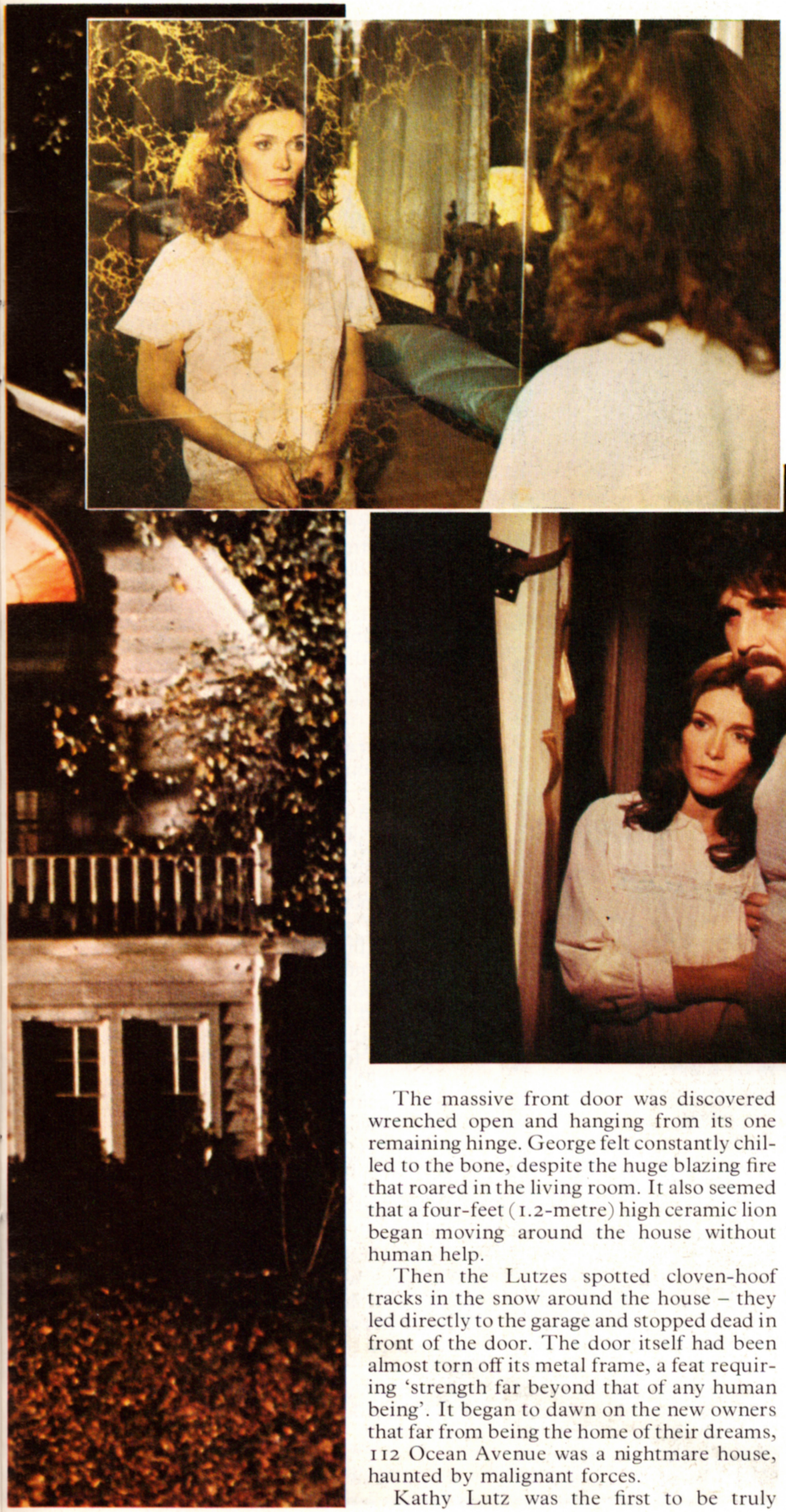
At his trial the prosecution maintained that DeFeo's motive was a wild attempt to lay his hands on life insurance worth $200,000, plus the considerable funds in the family cash box. Defence attorney William Weber countered with a plea of insanity, backed up by testimony from a string of psychiatrists. But the jury rejected that plea and Ronald DeFeo was sentenced to six consecutive life-terms.

When the trial was over, the DeFeo house was put up for sale. It was an imposing three-storey residence built in the Dutch Colonial style in 1928, and with its garage, boathouse and swimming pool made a substantial property that should have commanded a high figure. Instead, in view of its unhappy history, the house agents offered it at the bargain price of $80,000 but, even so, it remained empty for nearly a year before the Lutz family moved in on 18 December 1975.

Recently married, George Lutz was a 28-year-old ex-marine who ran a land-surveying company; his wife Kathy, a divorcee, was fully occupied looking after her two small sons and five-year-old daughter. The large rambling house seemed the ideal place for a young family. But only a month later the Lutzes were to flee from it – victims, they said, of a relentless, nameless terror.

The full story of their ordeal was told in the book *The Amityville horror* (1978) by Jay Anson, which was based on many interviews with the Lutzes themselves. This book became a best-seller and was acclaimed as 'one of the most terrifying true cases ever of haunting and possession by demons'.

According to the account in the book, the trouble began with overpoweringly foul stenches pervading the house. The bathroom fittings became stained with a black slime, and no household cleaner would remove the stains. Then came the flies – hundreds of them swarming into a second-floor bedroom.



In a scene from the film *The Amityville horror* (1979) the Lutzes' house at 112 Ocean Avenue (far left) assumes a menacing aspect at night when the two top-floor windows seem to stare out like baleful eyes. Another manifestation of the malignant forces in the house is the loathsome slime that Kathy, played by Margot Kidder in the film, finds covering the mirror in her bedroom (above left). Later George (played by James Brolin) and Kathy are awakened in the middle of the night to find the heavy front door wrenched wide open, apparently from the inside, and hanging from its one remaining hinge (left)

terrorised by the entities. Invisible arms embraced her and tried to gain possession of her body; she felt that escape was impossible and that she was going to die. Others, too, were feeling the effects of the 'horror'. A priest who had befriended the Lutzes was struck down by a mysterious, enervating infection, and the rectory where he lived was filled with a horrible smell that drove all the occupants out into the open air.

At Ocean Avenue George's own experience of the presences was the sound of a marching band parading around the house, boots thumping and horns blaring. Although he was convinced there must be at least 50 musicians not one was ever seen, yet the furniture was found pushed back against the walls as if to make room for the marchers.

Other manifestations of the sadistic forces were the loathsome slime, and hideously painful red weals that erupted on Kathy's body, as if she had been slashed with a red-hot poker. There were also, according to the book, levitations, drastic personality changes, and demons.

The massive front door was discovered wrenched open and hanging from its one remaining hinge. George felt constantly chilled to the bone, despite the huge blazing fire that roared in the living room. It also seemed that a four-feet (1.2-metre) high ceramic lion began moving around the house without human help.

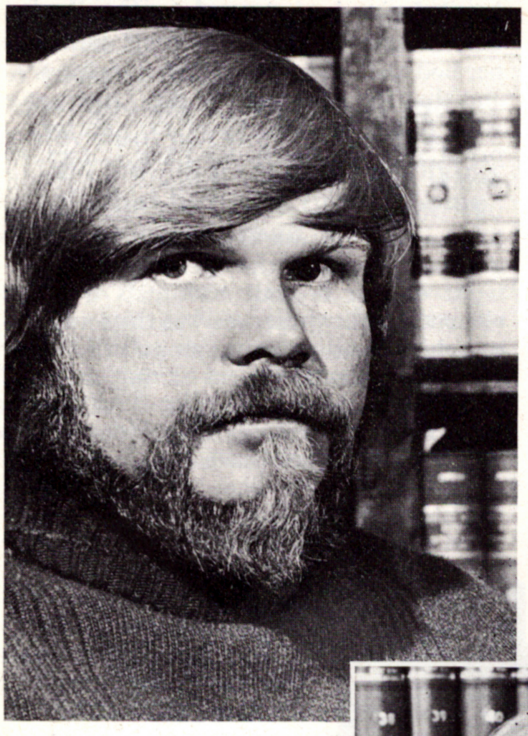
Then the Lutzes spotted cloven-hoof tracks in the snow around the house – they led directly to the garage and stopped dead in front of the door. The door itself had been almost torn off its metal frame, a feat requiring 'strength far beyond that of any human being'. It began to dawn on the new owners that far from being the home of their dreams, 112 Ocean Avenue was a nightmare house, haunted by malignant forces.

Kathy Lutz was the first to be truly

On 14 January 1976 the Lutzes left the house, never to return. But according to the account of their experiences related in *The Amityville horror: part 2* (a sequel to the first book) the evil presences followed them to their new home, where they stayed 'coiled malevolently round them'.

If all this is true, it is a grim and horrifying story. But it is so like fiction that it prompts the reader to ask whether there was ever an authentic horror in the first place. Independent researchers who have investigated the facts have all emphatically answered no.

Dr Stephen Kaplan, the director of the



As told to Jay Anson, author of the book *The Amityville horror* (1978), George Lutz (above) felt continually cold in the house, despite a high level of heating, and was plagued by the sound of a brass band that nobody could see. He began to identify with multiple murderer Ronald DeFeo (above right) whom he imagined he resembled physically. His wife Kathy (right) suffered from painful red weals over her body, as if she had been burned with a red-hot poker

Parapsychology Institute of America, said after months of study and many interviews with those involved in the affair of 'the Amityville horror':

> We found no evidence to support any claim of a 'haunted house'. What we did find is a couple who had purchased a house that they economically could not afford. It is our professional opinion that the story of its haunting is mostly fiction.

After visiting the house Jerry Solfvin, of the Psychical Research Foundation, wrote that the case 'wasn't interesting to us because the reports were confined to subjective responses from the Lutzes, and these were not at all . . . characteristic of these cases.'

The most damning report of all originated with investigators Rick Moran and Peter Jordan who visited Amityville and interviewed people mentioned in the book. Among their startling findings was the fact that the police denied ever investigating the house while the Lutzes were in residence, although the book describes Sergeant Cammaroto touring the house and even inspecting a 'secret room' in the basement.

Father Mancuso (in real life Father Pecorara), the priest who appears throughout the book, flatly denied that he had ever entered the Lutzes' home; so the tale about him blessing the building (and the phantom voice that ordered him out) must be quite bogus. And the pastor of the Sacred Heart rectory dismissed as 'utter nonsense' the Lutzes' yarn about a 'disgusting odour that permeated the rectory' – the alleged 'scent of the devil' – which was supposed to have driven the priests out of their rooms and the building.

In fact, very little in the book stood up under scrutiny. Local handymen and locksmiths knew nothing of the paranormal damages they were supposed to have repaired. And far from being driven out of the house by hauntings, it appeared that the real reasons for the Lutzes leaving their home were much more prosaic: a cash crisis and a near-breakdown.

Defence strategy

Naturally enough, the Lutzes have responded to these revelations with bluff and bluster. But it is worth noting that they have repeatedly avoided a confrontation with their critics on radio or television; and in fact their original accounts were only about things felt and sensed, not about objective phenomena.

Indeed, it was Ronald DeFeo's defence attorney, William Weber, who first pushed the couple into the limelight. DeFeo had spoken of a voice that urged him to kill, and Weber hoped to win a new trial for him by establishing that the house contained some force able to influence the behaviour of the inhabitants. Pinning his hopes on the Lutzes, he won them time on New York's *Ten O'Clock News* television programme.

Although at the outset Weber's involvement seemed to be on a purely professional basis, he later admitted that he had helped to sensationalise the Lutzes' story. In a press release on 27 July 1979 he said, 'We created this horror story over many bottles of wine that George was drinking. We were really playing with each other.'

But the case against the Lutzes does not rest solely on these testimonies by outsiders. The Lutzes themselves have given ample evidence of their unreliability in major interviews recorded before the book was published.

A hooded figure and horned demon are among the 'horrors' examined on page 2438

Post script

Your letters to THE UNEXPLAINED

Dear Sir,
During the spring and summer of 1977 my wife and I would often indulge our favourite pastime of visiting our local public house. On fine evenings we would take our drinks and sit outside in the grounds. One night, however, it was colder than usual, and everyone else crowded into the bar, leaving me alone outside. Watching the dark night sky, I was absorbed by the sight of the various constellations. Fifteen minutes later I was still there, admiring the stars and thinking how sharply they stood out in the heavens. Then, on lowering my gaze slightly, I received the shock of my life. Right in front of me, and headed straight towards me, was a formation of UFOs. I gazed with trepidation and walked forward a few steps to make sure I wasn't dreaming, then stopped dead in my tracks. An indescribable feeling came over me as I realised that what so many people had reported before was, for me, now true.

Realising that a witness was needed to make the sighting more credible, I turned towards the bar, but I made sure the objects were still there before going in. Then I beckoned to a casual acquaintance named Dennis to join me. I had no intention of bursting in and shouting that a formation of UFOs was bearing down on the public house.

As Dennis reached the door I pointed upwards saying 'Pigeons': I did not want to implant any suggestion of UFOs in his mind. His eyes widened in surprise and his mouth gaped. 'No, they're not pigeons,' he said quietly, looking as though he had just seen a ghost.

Just then my small daughter Julie slipped out through the open door and, looking upwards, she pointed and said 'Coo!' The three of us went outside and stood silently watching the UFOs, which were flying almost overhead. We then ran quickly round to the other side of the public house, but the glare from the street lamps made it impossible to see anything.

Returning to the bar we discussed what we had seen. I asked Julie what she thought the objects were; when she replied 'Swans', I didn't disillusion her. A few years later I mentioned the fact that she had seen some UFOs, but she had forgotten all about the incident.

The details on which Dennis and I agreed are as follows. Each UFO was shaped roughly like an elongated diamond, with the top and bottom squared instead of pointed. The UFOs were flying low, at about the same height as light aeroplanes, and not very fast. They were all more or less the same size and slightly longer than a light aeroplane.

About a dozen UFOs flew in a triangular formation, adjoining a similar group consisting of about eight craft. At the rear two more UFOs moved from side to side while maintaining their position in the formation; they wobbled slightly, rather like a child's spinning top. The entire squadron was orange coloured and silent.

Later we told other people in the bar what we had seen; they didn't disbelieve us, but they did wish they could have seen the objects themselves.

The next day I gave details to the local paper, thinking they would forward them to a UFO society. However, the young reporter who interviewed me treated the affair as a joke – which is, perhaps, an attitude adopted by many people when faced with out-of-the-ordinary occurrences that they do not understand. His manner changed considerably when he realised that I was serious and that I also had a witness. However, I left the newspaper office with a feeling that reporting the matter had been a waste of time.

A few days later, when certain facts had been checked, the newspaper published an article about the sighting; unfortunately, this was not entirely accurate. Subsequently, I heard from several people who had also experienced incidents with UFOs but lacked the courage to report them. Eventually, I wrote to a few UFO societies myself giving them the details, but none of them even acknowledged my letter.

Since then I have spent a great deal of time sky watching and have seen several different types of UFO; the last sighting I made was in daylight, and the craft was of the classic 'flying saucer' type.

I have now read several books and magazines on the subject of UFOs. Many theories have been put forward as to what they might be, but no one seems to have come up with a feasible solution. To my mind, at least they stimulate the imagination, and perhaps that is their purpose.

Yours faithfully,
Ken Wintle West Bromwich

Dear Sir,
In 1966 my fiancé was killed in a car accident. He was an only child, and his mother felt she had nothing left in her life. I introduced her to Spiritualism in the hope that it would offer her some comfort, and she started holding regular meetings in her home with a medium and several friends. Many messages were received from her son, and from other people. She also told me of pictures and ornaments being moved in the house, and took it to be her son trying to contact her.

In 1979 she died, leaving me her house and its contents. As the house was some distance from where I lived I had to spend several weekends there sorting things out before I could sell it. On one occasion I had just arrived at the house and walked into the lounge when music started playing very loudly; it was coming from the desk and, on opening the drawer, I found a transistor radio – switched on and at full volume. The house had been empty and locked up for two months.

On another occasion when I paid my first visit in six weeks, the water was hot. At other times the lights went out, photographs of my dead fiancé fell from the shelves, and locked wardrobe doors flew open. One day after doing the garden a friend and I left the house in a hurry, leaving the shears covered with grass and mud. When we returned a month later the shears had been cleaned and dried.

The house was always kept locked between my visits, which I always made with a friend who also witnessed these strange happenings. However, we never felt nervous or frightened; in fact we both noticed a great feeling of peace every time we entered the house.

Yours faithfully,
J. Westlake (Mrs) Felixstowe, Suffolk

Send *your* letters to THE UNEXPLAINED, Orbis House, 20–22 Bedfordbury, London WC2N 4BT

A pain in the neck

Most people become very annoyed when told that their illness is 'all in the mind' – for, after all, if it hurts surely it must originate in the body. But one controversial theory suggests that many illnesses are dramatisations of verbal puns

It was a mystery ailment. Three days before Christmas Jane, who was staying with her parents, was woken up by an excruciating pain in one big toe. The toe was neither red nor swollen, but the agony persisted. Sleep was out of the question, and next day Jane hobbled to a doctor.

He pronounced that the pain must be due to either gout or arthritis and sent her off to have blood tests at the local hospital. All this – apart from the pain – was very annoying as a colleague, whom Jane knew only slightly, was due to stay with her family for the holidays, and there was still shopping to be done.

The blood tests were negative. The doctor accused Jane of 'imagining' it, despite her white face and pronounced limp. On arriving home, Jane was told by her parents that Joyce, the colleague, had telephoned and cancelled her visit.

Jane felt an overwhelming sense of relief: she hadn't realised how much she disliked Joyce; but it wasn't until a few pain-filled days later that she found herself openly admitting it, saying 'I didn't want her to come but really *I couldn't put my foot down*.' From that moment the pain began to ebb and it had gone completely within 48 hours.

In a sense Jane had been 'imagining' it as the doctor had said, although not with the aim of seeking attention as he had implied. Her mind had buried her dislike of Joyce and her irritation at the thought of her impending visit, but had seized on a 'well-known phrase or saying' – 'I couldn't put my foot down' – and expressed the negative feelings by dramatising it. And this, many psychologists believe, is a much commoner phenomenon than one might expect.

In the early 20th century a contemporary of Sigmund Freud, Dr George Grobbeck, discovered that certain hysterical – or psychosomatic – illnesses are enactments of suppressed emotions. Under hypnosis one patient revealed the secret of her mysterious paralysis: her life was so awful she simply felt she 'couldn't go on'. Similarly, a blind woman, who revealed herself to be sighted when hypnotised, confessed that she 'couldn't face' her problems.

Chinese sages, thousands of years ago, also understood this direct relationship between illness and mental attitudes. In the *I Ching* (see page 1926) Hexagram 31 advises: 'The influence shows itself in the back of the neck . . . the most rigid part of the body. When influence shows itself there, the will remains firm . . . hence remorse does not enter into consideration here. . . .' And Hexagram 47 declares: 'But one gets no hearing; the trigram K'an means earache, hence disinclination to listen.'

To many this may sound like simplistic nonsense, but the fact remains that words run constantly and unbidden through our minds: snatches of songs, childhood rhymes and the proverbs and clichés that we grew up with. Hypnosis has revealed that even the most illiterate seem to have subconscious access while dreaming to a whole world of clever puns and even mythological or literary allusions. We are very verbal animals.

Difficult to swallow?

We talk of a person or a situation as being 'a pain in the neck', but rarely connect that 'crick' or touch of rheumatism with our anxieties. Similarly, finding something 'difficult to swallow' may take the form of a sore throat, or an intense 'gut' reaction creates unpleasant intestinal upheavals, and so on.

There is even a school of thought that believes that happy people do not get cancer – that the bereaved or unfulfilled have an 'emptiness inside' that seems to invite hostile cells into it. It is also maintained by some that introverts are more likely to contract cancer than those who let their feelings out. The 'lump in the throat' may turn out to be just that – and malignant.

Of course, our health is determined by many factors: genes, environment, diet and so on. But there is no doubt that it is the mind that can either override their influence on us – or, as it were, say 'I give up'.

We know the mind can let us walk unscathed over fire (see page 301), create phantom pregnancies, bleed from spontaneous wounds (see page 846), or not bleed at all, even if we are run through with swords while entranced (see page 2366). It can make us ill, it can make us well. And we do not know its limits.